Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (12:25): This is a very historic day for the community on Norfolk Island. This legislation will forever change the government's arrangements for the people of Norfolk Island and indeed provide for them for the first time access to all the services and all the rights that other Australian citizens take for granted.

I was a member of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories inquiry into economic development on Norfolk Island and I welcome the report entitled *Same country: different world—the future of Norfolk Island*, which was passed down by that committee here in this parliament in October of last year. The report made recommendations which had universal cross-party support within this parliament and had wide support across the Norfolk Island community, although there has been and continues to be contention about one of the recommendations—that is, to effectively end the self-government act of Norfolk Island and to set up a new legislative framework and a new governance structure which provides regional government to the community. I understand that that is a cause of concern but, nevertheless, it is my strong view that this legislation is important to the future of Norfolk Island and to the Norfolk Island community.

I have been associated in one way or another with discussion around these issues since the early 1990s. It has been a cause of much frustration not only to myself but to other members of this parliament and former ministers who have found it almost impossible to get the sorts of reforms required to move Norfolk Island forward. The report of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories provided the opportunity for the government to respond to the recommendations of the report. It has done that in the form of this legislation, where it has effectively adopted the principal recommendations of that report.

It is time for action. It is time to address the economic development of Norfolk Island, to address declining employment, to create growth in a range of industries—but particularly in tourism—to better manage the revenue and expenditure of the island community and to bring an even more confident outlook to the community of Norfolk Island and a satisfaction to the lifestyle of the islanders equal to other communities on the mainland, which is their right. The objectives of this legislation are: to reform governance arrangements of Norfolk Island; the extension of mainland social security, immigration and health arrangements; and changes to the tax system.

For the Norfolk Island community—so people understand—currently there is no access to the age pension. There is no access to family tax benefits. People on Norfolk Island do not fully participate in the Australian taxation system. They do not have access to the Medicare and pharmaceutical benefits entitlements of other Australians. They do not have access to the protection of employment laws that other Australians have. So these changes are fundamental and are very, very important.

This legislation will introduce changes through a transitional period over the next 12 months so that from July 2016 Norfolk Island residents will pay income tax and other direct federal taxes on all their income and will obviously get the benefits of being members of the Australian community through the other entitlements which I have referred to. The introduction, for example, of the mainland social security and taxation systems will have enormous economic benefits for the island community. These systems will provide, in my view, confidence in investment in the island.

There is strong bipartisan support for the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly to be transitioned to a regional council. The template for local government—in this case, this regional council structure—is going to be unique for each territory, in particular, in this case, on Norfolk Island. I will in a moment refer to the other external territories which we have. I have the fortune of being the member for Lingiari, which includes the external territories of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island. This legislation we have before us will effectively bring Norfolk Island in line with Christmas and Cocos islands in terms of their governance arrangements and their treatment for taxation purposes. There are obviously different environmental circumstances to Norfolk Island,
but the challenges are remarkably similar. The regional council to be established on Norfolk Island will have to make decisions about what services can be managed and can be delivered.

We need to appreciate that, as a result of this legislation, effectively the body of law which will apply in terms of state type functions will become the laws of New South Wales as they change from time to time, but ultimately the person responsible for those laws as they apply to Norfolk Island will be not the New South Wales Premier but the minister responsible for territories in this parliament. I know that there is a concern which has been expressed on other occasions about people not having access to the New South Wales parliament, when decisions are made by that parliament about laws which will have an impact on Norfolk Island. This is true also of decisions which have been taken in the Western Australian parliament in the case of Christmas and Cocos islands around laws of Western Australia which apply on Christmas and Cocos islands. There will need to be the development of service delivery arrangements for the range of state type services that will apply on Norfolk Island, as has been the case for Christmas Island. This will include, for example, potentially health and hospital services, adequate roads, infrastructure, maintenance, the application of the local government act and many other spheres of activity.

The coming 12 months of what is titled the ‘interim transition time’ under the legislation are critical for the future of Norfolk Island as a new foundation is laid through a local advisory council to be appointed by the minister as a precursor to the election of a regional council. It is important, and I want to encourage people of Norfolk Island to put their names forward if they think they want to be a participant on this advisory council. This is not a council which is here to do the bidding of the minister; this is a council to provide advice to the government around issues to do with the transition process on Norfolk Island. As we know, as a result of this legislation, other federal laws will apply which currently do not apply on Norfolk Island. As Minister Briggs pointed out in his second reading speech earlier in the year:

These changes—

in this legislation—

will bring Norfolk Island in line with other Australian communities and ensure services are delivered to a modern standard by the appropriate level of government.

That is as it should be.

I said earlier that I have had some experience with these matters before, and it is a challenge. It must be a partnership between the Commonwealth and Norfolk Islanders in the process for implementing these reforms. It is really imperative that the community is brought along, that there is adequate and appropriate consultation and that people are involved in the discussions as equals and not seen as being vassals. They have to be put in a position where they understand that they have a real voice, and I am sure that will be the case if this consultation process, which I know that the minister envisages, takes place.

But, having said that, there has been feedback from Norfolk Island about people being unhappy with the consultation processes currently in play. Whilst many islanders are excited and express their support at the prospect of changes, they are nonetheless apprehensive. That is to be understood, and we need to appreciate it. It is therefore important that this consultation period is an effective consultation period where people feel as if they are engaged in the decision-making process in providing advice, ultimately, to the government. Islanders clearly need to be informed of when the consultations are going to take place so that they can make sure that their voice is really heard and to give them a say. We need to make sure that there is a clear understanding of how the benefits which are derived from getting access to mainstream services will impact upon those communities.

I know that the member for Canberra, who will speak later, will have the great good fortune, as a result of this legislation, of having the Norfolk Island voters voting in her electorate. In my case, the external territories of Christmas and Cocos islands vote in my electorate. For the purpose of federal elections from here on, this will mean that the Norfolk Islanders will be voting in the electorate of Canberra, and the member for Canberra will be their member of parliament. She already has people on Norfolk Island who have voted in her electorate in the past because there has been a capacity for people to choose which electorate they vote in, effectively. She will now have the responsibility of representing them here in the parliament, and I know she will be a very strong voice for their interests, as she has been thus far.
As I said at the outset, this is an historical piece of legislation. Things will change forever for the people of Norfolk Island. Instead of some people working two, three or four jobs and not having access to appropriate healthcare, not having support services if they are aged, not getting access to the social security system and income support and not getting proper protections as employees, life will change for them. It will give them great benefit and they will be full members of the Australian community, just like all of us in this parliament and everyone in our own home electorates. That is the important message here. I understand the concerns about people saying, 'This means our rights are being trammelled because self-government is being taken away from us,' but, frankly, self-government did not work. It was clearly not sustainable.

I said that I had been engaged in discussions about this 20 years ago. I went to the island in the mid-1990s as the person responsible for the external territories and initiated the discussions with people about normalising taxation arrangements and changing governance. This discussion has been ongoing. The first inquiry took place in Norfolk Island in 1979. The fact that we are here today with this legislation is the result of many inquiries and a royal commission into the affairs of Norfolk Island. I know it is a harsh statement, but in part the fact that we are doing this today is because of the obduracy of some elements of the Norfolk Island community—not all, but some. I know from my own experience and personal interaction that there are very strong advocates on the Norfolk Island committee for the changes which we are putting in place today.

I give this undertaking—and I know this is something which will be shared by my colleagues on this side of the chamber and I am sure even on the government benches—that we do want to make sure this works to your benefit. We do want to make sure that you are engaged in the discussions and the decision making which will happen around the future of Norfolk Island, and we do want to make sure that these changes are to your benefit. I commend this legislation to the House.